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OBSERVATIONS
UPON THE
MIRACULOUS CONCEPTION
OF
OUR SAVIOUR:
WITH
A PARTICULAR VIEW
TO THE
EXCEPTIONS
OF
Dr. PRIESTLEY,
ON THE SUBJECT.

With an Advertisement upon Dr. EDWARDS'S
Objections to the Testimony of
CHRIST and his APOSTLES.

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M,DCC,XC.



To the READER.

THE out-line of the following work, was originally written, with a view to the Author's own satisfaction; in consequence of his having read Dr. Priestley's Observations upon the Miraculous Conception of our Saviour. He, afterwards, submitted it to the perusal of some friends; whose judgment, from long experience, he had good reason to value. Their approbation, expressed in

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terms

terms of uncommon warmth, (encouraged him, upon his being appointed to preach at the Visitation of Dr. now Sir Wm. Scott, at Canterbury, in the year 1788,) to throw it into the form of a Sermon, and to make such additions to it, as were consistent with the time allotted for such a service. The reception it then met with from his learned hearers, was, in some measure, such as justified the opinion of his friends.

It has since lain by him, in that state, till the spring of the present year; when some new thoughts occurring, which appeared to him, to be of considerable weight in support,

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both of the internal and external evidence, for the truth of the Miraculous Conception ; he has ventured to submit the whole to the publick judgment ; not as a complete, and full vindication of that Miracle ; but as a fair and candid attempt, to obviate the principal difficulties, which have been urged against it, by the writer above-mentioned,

It is much to be lamented, though by no means to be wondered at, (the long lapse of time being considered) that the writings of most of the early Christians, have perished ; and that we have no account of their sentiments, upon various subjects, which

are, at this day, matter of controversy. It is particularly so, that there are no remains of the arguments for, and against, the Miraculous Conception, transmitted down to us; as, in all probability, they would have enabled us to judge, with greater certainty, of the truth or falshood of that doctrine, than we can now do. Dr. Priestley, however, has attempted to make up for this defect, by wandering into the wide field of conjecture, and he has indulged himself in it, in no common degree.

The Author of the ensuing pages, has endeavoured to expose the weakness

ness of these conjectures; and he has shewn, he thinks with no small degree of probability, that even, if we take things according to Dr. Priestley's own representation; the detection of a forgery, (if any such there was) would have been inevitable. Indeed, if there is any merit, in what the Author has advanced upon this head, he stands indebted to Dr. Priestley, for the very fair opportunity he has, in some instances, given him, of animadverting upon the inconsistency of his reasoning: and he hopes he has not done it, in an improper, or unbecoming manner.

If Dr. Priestley, in his Observations upon the Miraculous Conception,

tion, had contented himself with endeavouring, by every fair argument, and by all the evidence, both internal and external, which his attention to the subject, could suggest; he would have performed a service, truly acceptable to the publick; for by such enquiries, properly conducted, Truth would, in the issue, be a gainer. But the free manner in which Dr. Priestley has treated the sacred Writers is (though he readily gives him credit for the goodness of his intentions) in the Author's opinion, injurious to the cause of Christianity. To suppose as he has done; that St. Luke might be the Author of this history, and have taken up, that splendid part of his

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narrative, too hastily ; is more than seems to be justifiable—more than was necessary to the success of his argument—more, the author trusts, than Dr. Priestley will, upon cool reflection, undertake to defend. If the history of the Miraculous Conception, was a forgery ; St. Luke had nothing to do with it. If it was not a forgery, but his genuine composition ; it must stand its ground ; or St. Luke's credit, as an historian, is gone for ever.

To conclude ; the Author begs leave to observe to the reader, that he has endeavoured, in his remarks upon Dr. Priestley's arguments,
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faithfully to quote his own words ; and in general, to point them out, by inverted commas, and to give the references at the foot of the page. In some lesser instances, he may, through inadvertency, have omitted to do this—but he pledges himself to the publick, that he has not, in any case, wilfully misrepresented him. If this had been necessary to the vindication of the Miracle in question ; he is bold to say, he would never have stood forth, as an advocate for it.

Ash, July 12, 1790.

OBSERVATIONS
ON THE
MIRACULOUS CONCEPTION.

IT is a strong recommendation of Christianity, independent of every other evidence of its truth, that it treats men as rational beings, and invites them to examine its nature and evidences, with the utmost freedom and impartiality. Its Author appealed to their Judgments and Understandings. They were called upon to search the Scriptures—to give a reason of the hope that was in them—and such as manifested a spirit of enquiry, were highly commended for it.

As this Religion was not published in an age of barbarity and ignorance, but in the most enlightened period of which ancient times could boast, the invitation to freedom of enquiry was not an useless one. It was actually subjected to the severest scrutiny, both among the Jews, to whom its glad tidings were first communicated, and among the more polished Gentiles. The former possessed, in an eminent degree, every advantage to crush this rising religion, in its infancy; and the Gospel history furnishes us with ample evidence, that they availed themselves of those advantages: nor, are there wanting instances in the same history, of its sustaining an examination, equally rigid, among the wisest and most intelligent of the Greeks and Romans; not to mention the many controversies, between Christians and Heathens, upon the merits of their respective religions, recorded by profane historians.

Modern

Modern times pretend to vie with, and even to excel antiquity in wisdom, and a more extensive progress in general science; and, in many important respects, their claim is indisputable. Yet, with all the advantages of the objections, borrowed from the ancients, added to those, which their own sagacity has discovered, Christianity has stood its ground, and baffled every effort of wit and argument, which genius, united with the strongest powers of reasoning, could exert.

In the early part of the present century particularly, the truth of our holy religion was scrutinized with uncommon vigour by its adversaries; which produced such pleas in its favour, as have not only enriched our language and our libraries, and done immortal honour to the worthy authors of them, but afforded ample satisfaction to the impartial enquirer, into the general evidences of its truth.

If we except the celebrated historian of the Roman Empire, who has, lately, renewed the attack upon Christianity, and been solidly answered by persons of the first character, for genius and literature, religious controversies now seem to take a different turn. The question now is, not whether Christianity, in the gross, is true, or not; but whether particular doctrines and facts, at present contained in the received copies of the New Testament, are properly understood—or are parts of the genuine, and original copies of that book? Upon the former of these subjects, the sentiments of professed, and serious Christians, are (I had almost said) as wide as the poles; for which, (were this a proper place for it) various causes might be assigned. There are others, in my estimation, equally deserving the appellation of serious Christians, who think there is reason to doubt the truth, of some
of

of the facts, recorded in our present copies of the Gospels.

It is with this latter class of Christians that I am, at present, concerned; particularly with relation to the History of the Miraculous Conception of the Author of our Religion; which not only occupies a much larger space in the narrative of the Evangelists, than any other single fact, which they have recorded; but is related, in a most circumstantial manner, and with an evident design to make a strong impression upon the mind of the reader. This narration, however, it seems, was early suspected of being a forgery, and no part of the original, authentic history of Jesus Christ. And though it has, for near seventeen centuries, at least, generally been received by the Christian church, as of the same authority with the other parts of the Gospels; yet, as it is possible that it may

have been one of the early corruptions of genuine Christianity (of which, it must be owned, there were too many instances) it seems to me, perfectly consistent with that spirit of enquiry which Christianity evidently encourages; and with the clearest principles of genuine protestantism, that a candid, and impartial enquiry, should be made into the evidences for the truth of this miracle—and that the exceptions which were formerly, or are, at present, urged against its authenticity, should be considered with attention; that it may appear, whether there is any just reason for discarding it from the sacred code.

If the Miraculous Conception is a cunningly devised fable—If there is any good ground to suppose that it was a fabrication, invented after the publication of the Gospels, to answer the purpose of a party; or to aggrandize the character of Jesus beyond

beyond the limits which were intended by the Almighty; or which he himself assumed; let it no longer disgrace the records of Christianity. Whoever can point out the imposture, will be entitled, not to the censure, but to the applause of all wise and good men—of all who prefer truth to falsehood—fact to fiction.

If, on the other hand, the Miraculous Conception rests upon the same historic evidence which authorizes us to receive the other parts of the New Testament—If it coincides with other measures of divine providence, in its communication with mankind; particularly as those measures are connected with the character and office of Jesus—we have as little reason to be ashamed to receive it, as to receive any of the undoubted, and uncontroverted facts recorded in the Gospel history.

It will readily be conceived, that I have in view Dr. Priestley's celebrated attack upon this primary Miracle recorded in our Gospels; in which he is clearly of opinion that it deserves to be ranked among the corruptions of Christianity, and that it was coined on purpose to give a dignity to our Lord, to which he had no right, or claim.

It is but justice to this ingenious and indefatigable writer, to acknowledge that he has supported his opinion with great ability and acuteness, and adduced a variety of arguments against the Miraculous Conception, which well deserve the attention of the friends of Truth. Some of them, however, appear to me to be highly injurious to the cause of Christianity in general: and others, that seem to carry the greatest weight with them, are not so satisfactory, at least, in my opinion, as to
warrant

warrant a rejection of the account which the Gospels give of this matter. I have therefore, though fully sensible of the very superior abilities of Dr. Priestley, presented to the reader, in the following pages, such observations, as occurred to me, upon a careful perusal of his work. Whether they have a tendency to obviate any of the objections urged against the Miraculous Conception, by our author, and to throw light upon the subject, must be left to the judicious reader to determine. I have only to add, in their behalf, that they are not, that I am aware of, mixed with an unbecoming severity of language, too usual in controversies of this kind, though it can never, really, be of service to any cause; nor have I used any arguments, which the whole tenor of the Scriptures, do not appear to me to justify, even upon Dr. Priestley's own principles. He has a right to the treatment of a gentleman;

tleman ; for he writes like one ; and he is too acute, and too earnest, in the cause in which he is engaged, to be trifled with : not to mention that a contention of this nature, should be engaged in, not for victory, but for truth ; the professed object of all our enquiries.

The exceptions made to the Miraculous Conception of our Saviour, by Dr. Priestley, are of three kinds—those taken from its natural improbability—those drawn from the Evangelical historians own account of it, or its internal evidence ; and lastly—those which arise from its external evidence, or, to express myself with more accuracy—from the defect of evidence from Ecclesiastical history.

Upon each of these heads, Dr. Priestley has expatiated, very largely, in his celebrated History of the Corruptions of
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Christianity—in the Theological Repository, (a periodical work, of which he is the avowed Conductor,) and occasionally, in other parts of his writings; and in remarking upon them, I shall follow the method here laid down.

Upon the subject of the natural improbability of this Miracle, our author observes, “ that he cannot discover any
 “ reason why Christ should be born of a
 “ Virgin rather than in the usual way—
 “ or that it was at all necessary, or advantageous to the great object of his
 “ mission, or to qualify him for fulfilling
 “ it.” On the contrary, he asserts, “ that
 “ a priori it must have appeared less
 “ probable that Christ, being sent on such
 “ a mission as his was, should be born of
 “ a Virgin, than that he should be born
 “ like other men; as it might have been
 “ suspected that he would not have been
 “ pro-

“ produced in this manner, if it had not
 “ been for the sake of giving him such
 “ advantages in point of constitution, as
 “ men, born in the usual way, cannot
 “ naturally have.” See Theol. Rep. vol.
 4. pp. 250, 251.

This reasoning, I confess, is plausible.
 But may it not, with propriety, be asked,
 whether we are, in all cases, competent
 judges, a priori, what would be the mea-
 sures of the divine conduct towards man-
 kind? A priori, it might be thought that
 God, who originally established the laws
 of nature, and fixed the order of the
 world, would not have broken through
 that establishment, or changed that order;
 and that whatever benevolent purposes he
 had formed in behalf of the human race,
 they would have been executed in perfect
 consistency with that order and that estab-
 lishment. Thus the Deist would reason,
 upon

upon Dr. Priestley's principles; but he would reason *weakly*, because fact and experience are against him! Revelation informs us, that the laws of nature were actually reversed, in a thousand instances—that water was turned into wine at a word spoken, contrary to the usual process of nature—that great multitudes were fed by a few loaves and fishes; the very fragments of which, far exceeded the original quantity—that persons wanting a limb had them restored to them; and that even the dead were raised again to life, after the strongest evidences of a dissolution.

What could have been more opposite to any priori reasonings than the temptation—the transfiguration—the resurrection and the ascension of our Saviour? Who that has observed human life and nature, would have expected to see so perfect and complete a character, as that of Jesus, exhibited
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in human form? Moses and the Prophets were great and good men, and they, each of them, shone in the exercise of some particular virtues.—But Jesus's virtues were unbounded, and unmixed with any stain or impurity. His character was, truly, *a unique*; perfectly singular, and unexampled in the creation; as were the circumstances (if any regard is to be paid to the records of Christianity) that attended the whole of what we know of him. His historians say, his birth was extraordinary, and they uniformly stile him, in a sense peculiar to himself, *the son, and the only begotten Son of God*, and the voice from Heaven, at his baptism, announced him as such. *This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased.* It is needless to say any thing of his life; for all who know any thing of it, will not hesitate to admit, that never man was, in this respect, like him! And when he died, he did not,
like

like other men, continue under the dominion of death, but rose again, and ascended to that Heaven from whence he originally came.*

From this view of things, which, I suppose, will be allowed by all who consider it with attention, not to be an unfair one; it may, I think, be left to any man's cool and deliberate judgment to determine, whether reasonings, from what might have been expected (if allowed in the case before us) would not affect all miracles whatsoever, and all deviations from the common and regular modes of instruction, and consequently affect, even the credi-

• When it is said that Christ came down from Heaven, and talked of ascending up where he was before; attempts have been made to apply these expressions *figuratively*; but nothing that I have seen is satisfactory to me. A prior existence seems necessarily connected with such expressions; especially the last.

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bility of Christianity itself! But this would be overturning the faith of history, and giving the lie to the records of seventeen centuries—to the works of friends and enemies—to ancient medals and coins—and to numerous publick monuments and inscriptions! In a word, it would be renouncing evidence, equal to what we have for any historical fact whatsoever!

To this reasoning, I am well aware, it will be replied, that most of the Miracles of the Gospel, differ very materially from this, which we are now considering, in the importance of the object, which they had in view. Those were evidently well calculated to produce conviction, that Jesus was the Messiah—but this does not seem to have been made known to the early converts to Christianity, and but slightly, if at all referred to, throughout the whole of the New Testament. Nay,
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our Author contends, " that it does not
 " appear to have answered any end what-
 " ever : And the doctrine of immortality
 " (which is said to be the great object of
 " the whole revealed will of God) is de-
 " clared to be just as acceptable, from the
 " mouth of the Son of Joseph and Mary,
 " as from the mouth of any man created
 " for the purpose—from that of an angel
 " —or from the voice of God himself,
 " speaking from Heaven ! " *

I should be very unwilling to assert, that the other Miracles recorded in the Gospels were not sufficient attestations of the Messiahship of Jesus, and of the truth of the doctrine of Immortality, taught by him, independent of the doctrine of the Miraculous Conception ; for I am disposed to believe (for reasons that will afterwards be assigned) that this doctrine was not, for some considerable time, made known to

* Theol. Repos. vol. iv. p. 246.

the majority of Jewish believers, or indeed to any of them. But admitting this, I do not see that the Messiahship of Jesus, and the doctrine of Immortality would not have been received with additional satisfaction, when so signal a mark of the divine favour came to be attested by credible witnesses.

If the Almighty thought it proper to give a Revelation to mankind, which was intended to be of lasting and universal benefit to them; it appears to me, far from improbable, that the messenger, whom he should think it proper to employ, would be invested with every mark of dignity, which might have a tendency to convince men of his heavenly origin. And it is remarkable that some of the Jews, at least, in our Saviour's time, certainly thought this would be one characteristic of their Messiah, that he should not have an ordinary

nary birth. *When Christ cometh, no man knoweth whence he is.* And it was objected against Jesus, that he was *the Carpenter's son, whose father and mother they knew.* This notion they probably drew from the Prophet Isaiah, who seems to intimate something of this kind, when, in his celebrated description of the Messiah's character, he asks with an appearance of wonder and astonishment—*who shall declare his generation?*

The Doctrine of Immortality may, to Dr. Priestley, be just as acceptable from the mouth of the Son of Joseph and Mary, as from the mouth of any other being, however exalted—but, to me, the dignity of the person would be so far from being an objection, that it would the more readily claim my regard. The case was an extraordinary one, and seems to justify, as I have already hinted, extraordinary manifestations of the divine interposition.

As to the advantages which a miraculous birth might be supposed to give to our Saviour, I feel my incompetency to speak upon this subject: but I have no difficulty in admitting that, if it had been the pleasure of the Almighty, those advantages might, (whatever they were) have all been communicated in a natural way, as well as by the manner in which Jesus is said to have been produced. Yet I cannot, with Dr. Priestley, think, that its being more honourable to Christ to have come into the world, without the help of Man, is an affair of *Imagination only*. If the Miraculous Conception is a fact, and the power and influence of the Holy Spirit is taken into the account; it must, surely, be something more than *an imaginary honour*! It certainly must, whatever Dr. Priestley may say to the contrary, in the eye of every man who believes it, enhance the dignity of our Saviour's character; and so far, at least, it answers a
 valu-

valuable end, in recommending *him* to the world, whom the Almighty distinguished, so remarkably, from the rest of mankind.

But enough of *priori* Reasonings; which, it is presumed, even Dr. Priestley would lay but little stress upon, in a case of this nature, if he did not conceive there were other evidences that the Miraculous Conception is liable to just suspicion.

What these evidences are, we are now to enquire. And, in the first place, we shall consider his exceptions to this Miracle, derived from the Gospels themselves; or, from their internal evidence; and submit it to the reader's judgment, whether his reasoning upon this part of the subject, bears so hard upon its authenticity, as he seems to think it does; only premising that the evidences for, or against

the Miraculous Conception, derived from this source, require no laboured researches. They are open to every man's observation, and the plain English reader, who is at all conversant in religious matters, is as competent to judge of them, when properly stated, as the most learned and enlightened.

The first objection against this Miracle, which I shall mention, is, that Mark and John are, entirely, silent upon the subject. Dr. Priestley thinks, that "if any part of
" the Gospel history required to be par-
" ticularly authenticated, by the testi-
" mony of different historians, it was this;
" especially as many things, of far less
" consequence, are recorded by them all,
" and very circumstantially."*

To render this objection of any great weight, it ought, I think, to be shewn that no circumstances, of consequence,

* Theol. Repos. vol. iv. p. 285.

are omitted by one Evangelist, which are related by another; and that they all unite in giving their testimony, to every fact of importance. This, however, is so far from being the fact, that even the transfiguration, of which John himself was a spectator, is not mentioned, or even hinted at, by him, so far as I can recollect, in any part of his Gospel; nor, indeed, in any one of his three epistles! But are we to reject the testimony of those Evangelists, who have recorded this Miracle, because it is omitted by others? If it be said, that the transfiguration is not a fact of equal importance with the Miracle in question, and that therefore, it was not so necessary to be recorded by all the Evangelists—we will take another instance.

If Dr. Priestley's conclusion against the Miraculous Conception, from the silence of Mark and John, is a fair one, what

shall we say of the Ascension of Christ? —a fact, the importance of which, even our Author himself, it is presumed, will not deny? It is recorded by Mark and Luke, but, is wholly omitted by the other Evangelists. Upon his principles therefore, the Ascension of Christ ought not to be believed by Christians, because, (to use his own words) if any one fact deserved to be particularly authenticated, by the testimony of different historians, it was this.

The same may be said of a great variety of other circumstances recorded by one Evangelist, but omitted by others, of which the reader will easily be convinced, by a slight view of Dr. Priestley's, or any other harmony of the Gospels.

I shall select one, only, of these, as it has the advantage of but one of the Evangelical historians to record it, and yet it
has

has not, that I know of, been objected to upon that account. The case to which I refer, is the attestation of Pilate's wife, to the innocence of Jesus's character, at the critical, and important moment, when he was about to be publicly condemned as a malefactor. *Have thou nothing to do with that just man; for I have suffered many things, this night, in a dream, because of him.* Matt. xxvii. 19.

If it be asked how St. Matthew came at the knowledge of this circumstance?—Whether he had it from Pilate himself—from Pilate's wife—from the messenger whom she sent to him—or from any other person, to whom it was communicated? These are questions which I feel myself absolutely incapable of answering! A person of tolerable abilities might work up some very formidable objections to this narration, (as Dr. Priestley has done in the case before us) to which, no other
answer

answer could be given, than that it stands upon the credit of the historian; who had as good an opportunity as any of the Evangelists, of obtaining perfect information about all things, of which he wrote, from the very first. If he could be deceived in this, or in any other instance, what regard will be due to the rest of his history?—or what criteria have we to distinguish fable from truth?

To apply this reasoning to the case before us. Matthew and Luke record the history of the Miraculous Conception.—Mark and John, it is said, omit every thing of the kind—but they might, for any thing that we can tell, have known that one, or both of them, had undertaken to record the history of our Lord's birth, and think it unnecessary to repeat it.

It appears therefore clear, beyond dispute, that the omission of one, or more of the Evangelical historians, will not justify the

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the rejection of narrations of facts, stated by the rest, without affecting the credibility of other facts, which even Dr. Priestley will not be inclined to dispute! Of course, the history of the Miraculous Conception is not, on this account, liable to any objection!

Thus much may, I think, with propriety, be said, upon the supposition that these Evangelists are silent about the Miraculous birth of Jesus. Whether they are so, or not, I shall neither affirm, nor deny, but simply state what the Evangelists have recorded; being persuaded, that what they have said, is, at least, worthy of attention.

There are four persons, who have undertaken to be the historians of the life, and transactions, of our Lord; all of whom appear to me, and have indeed generally been

been acknowledged to have, an equal claim to our credit. And, upon their information, so far as it goes, we must depend, for the judgment we are to form of Christianity, and of the nature and character of its author. Now, it is very remarkable, that each of these original historians differs from the rest, in their introductory accounts of our Saviour. Matthew and Luke agree in the main object—that the birth of their Lord and Master, was supernatural, and effected by the divine interposition. They differ only, in their selection of circumstances, and events; the one omitting several particulars, which are recorded by the other. St. John, it is said, omits every thing of this kind: but he tells his readers, that *Christ*, or the Logos, *was, in the beginning; with God, and was God—that all things were made by him—that the word was made flesh, and tabernacled among us*; and what is particularly
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remarkable—he styles him *the Son, and the only begotten Son of God.**

St. Mark's account is extremely short—but short as it is, it seems to convey an idea of dignity and greatness, if not of a

* The term *Son of God* has various significations in the sacred writings. Sometimes it signifies all mankind. Every Son of Adam is, very properly, termed, *a Son of God*; as he was created by him. Good men, also, are termed, *Sons of God*, from their resemblance to him in their moral endowments and amiable dispositions. And Dr. Lardner, in his Sermon upon the title of Jesus, as *the Son of God*, gives this, as the first reason, why he was so called; that his birth was miraculous. And he farther says—Jesus is *the Son of God*, in a sense peculiar to himself, transcendant and superior to all others. If this is true of his title as *the Son of God*—it will surely apply more forcibly to him, as *the only begotten Son of God*! It must not, however, be dissembled, that there is still another sense in which Jesus is called *the Son of God*, and that is; as he is *the Messiah—the anointed of God*; and this is the most usual sense in which Jesus is so styled. But whether this is the sole, appropriated meaning of the term in the introduction to St. John, may be matter of doubt.

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supernatural birth, independent of the other Gospels; but when considered in conjunction with them, apparently leads to the idea of that miraculous origin, which those Evangelists have, more fully and clearly, pointed out.

All schemes and systems of Divinity apart—a plain untutored reader would, I apprehend, be disposed to believe, that when Mark says—*The beginning of the Gospel of Jesus Christ*, THE SON OF GOD; and Luke, *that the holy Child that should be borne by Mary, should be called* THE SON OF GOD—the former, as well as the latter, alludes to his extraordinary birth! The resemblance, to say the least, is very striking!

I must not, however, omit our Author's method of reconciling the Evangelists; which, for its novelty, and its conciseness, is equally remarkable.—“ If,” says he,

“ we

“ we only take away the two first chapters
 “ of the Gospels of Matthew and Luke,
 “ and change a very few words in the
 “ verses that follow them, we shall find
 “ very proper beginnings for them both,
 “ and exactly corresponding to that na-
 “ tural and simple one of Mark; for they
 “ will then begin with an account of the
 “ preaching of John the Baptist; as in
 “ fact, the Gospel of John likewise does,
 “ after a short introduction concerning
 “ the meaning of the word *logos*, which
 “ was, probably, much talked of at that
 “ time.”* To do this, we see he acknow-
 ledges, he must change a very few words
 in the verses that follow. But notwith-
 standing this trifle, he asks—“ Does not
 “ this circumstance give us some suspicion,
 “ that both these Gospels of Matthew and
 “ Luke might originally have been pub-
 “ lished without those introductions, (and
 “ why not without the introduction of St.

* Theol. Repos. vol. iv. p. 286.

“ John too)?—that the introductions were
 “ written afterwards by other persons ; and
 “ that they were first annexed to the Gos-
 “ pels by those who admired them, and
 “ were afterwards copied, as proper parts
 “ of them ? ” *

This, it must be allowed, is an easy method of getting rid of, what are called, incumbrances on the Christian scheme.—But when we reflect, that it is, by our Author himself termed no more than *suspicion*, and has no other evidence to support it than that of the single Hebrew copy of the Gospel of the Ebionites—the reader will have no difficulty in determining which of the two schemes of reconciling the Evangelists—his, or mine is preferable !

Another exception urged against the history of the Miraculous Conception, by

* Theol. Repos. vol. 4. pp. 286—287.

our Author, is, "that it has in it some
 " marks of inconsistency, and of an ill di-
 " gested story."

" The surprize and admiration which
 " arose in the breast of the Mother of Jesus,
 " upon some particular occasions, during
 " his youth, are said to imply a doubt and
 " uncertainty, which were incompatible
 " with her knowledge of his being the
 " Messiah."

But this objection, so far as I can per-
 ceive, is not fraught with any great diffi-
 culty. It is a matter of fact which no
 one, I think, will venture to dispute, that
 many of our Lord's Disciples, and even
 the twelve Apostles themselves, after they
 were fully apprized of his sustaining the
 character of the Messiah, erred very much
 concerning the nature and design of that
 office. And Mary, so far as we know,
 was not better instructed, at the time

which the objection refers to, upon this head. Mary might therefore be ignorant of many circumstances and incidents which arose, from her Son's infancy, to the complete accomplishment of his work, in perfect consistency with her knowledge of his being the Messiah. This is not my opinion only, but it is the opinion also of a most able writer, whose testimony, upon this head, will not be suspected of prejudice or partiality; he being generally ranked among the Unitarians!

The writer, to whom I allude, is the celebrated Dr. Lardner, who observes,
 " that Mary might keep some things, and
 " ponder them, and be surprized, though
 " she had before had general intimations of
 " them. Luke ii. 19. he says, is one of
 " these places where she is said to ponder,
 " and with good reason. The song of the
 " Angels, which breathes nothing but peace
 " and

" and good will—the mean circumstances
 " of herself and her son at that time, might
 " well lead to serious meditation. Again :
 " Joseph and Mary had reason to marvel,
 " when Simeon spoke of the nature and
 " extent of this benefit, and went on also
 " to hint the disgraces and sufferings of
 " Jesus." *

Mary's marvelling at, and pondering
 things in her heart, which were so different
 from her's, and the generality of the
 people's notions of the Messiah's character,
 appears to me to be so far from an
 evidence of inconsistency—or of an ill-
 digested story, that it is perfectly congenial
 to the whole of the Evangelical
 history.

Again : It is said, " Jesus carefully
 " concealed his being the Messiah from
 " the Jews in general ; and it was only
 " at a late period in his history that he

* See a letter from Dr. Lardner to Dr. Morgan.

“ revealed it to the Apostles; and yet, in
 “ this introduction to the Gospel of Luke,
 “ it is supposed to have been known with
 “ certainty to the parents of John—to
 “ those of Jesus himself—to the Shepherds
 “ —and to the Prophets, Simeon and
 “ Anna; none of whom are said to have
 “ made any secret of it; and the last is
 “ said (ch. ii. v. 28.) *to have spoken of*
 “ *him to all who looked for redemption in*
 “ *Israel.*” *

Now, says the Author of the History of
 the Corruptions of Christianity—“ had this
 “ been the case, the eyes of all the country
 “ must have been fixed on Jesus, as the
 “ promised Messiah; and all attempts to
 “ conceal it, after his publick appearance,
 “ would have come too late.”

As this exception of our Author has a
 good deal of plausibility in it; it shall
 have all the attention that it deserves; and

* Theol. Repos. pp. 295—6.

I am very much mistaken, indeed, if it turns out to be of any weight in invalidating the truth of the history which we are examining !

It is a fact, which I think is not to be denied, that our Lord, upon various occasions, during his publick ministry, forbade those whom he had healed, to make him known ; and he, for a considerable time at least, concealed the important circumstance of his being the Messiah, not only from the Jews in general, but from his own immediate followers : and he was extremely shy of answering any questions that might have a tendency to draw from him an explicit declaration of this kind. This, at first sight, may appear to be want of candour and ingenuity, and to corroborate the exception of Dr. Priestley against the story of the Miraculous Conception, that the Messiahship of Jesus is there made known too soon ! But neither of these was the case.

Was it from want of candour that he declined making himself known under that character? No. This is contradicted by the whole tenor of his behaviour! All his miracles, and all his discourses, were evidently designed to convince the Jews of his true character; and he frequently upbraided them for their obstinacy and unbelief, in not receiving him as the promised Messiah. If he did not, in express terms, make himself known, under that character, it was from a regard to the publick peace, and that He might finish the work which his Father had given him a commission to execute. In a word, it was from necessity—not from choice—that he acted in this manner.

I rest not this upon my own assertion, but on the express testimony of the Evangelists. St. Matthew tells us, that when John the Baptist first made his appearance, *Jerusalem, and all Judea, and all the region*

region round about Jordan, went to be baptized by him. At this early period the language of John was—I indeed baptize you with water unto repentance; but he that cometh after me, is mightier than I, whose shoes I am not worthy to bear: he shall baptize you with the holy spirit, and with fire. In St. John's account of this meeting, the Jews are represented as questioning the Baptist, whether he was the Messiah or not—to which his reply was, that he was not the Christ. He at the same time points out, who the Messiah was, in terms sufficiently express. Looking upon Jesus, as he walked, he said—*Behold the lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world.* It was likewise at Jesus's baptism, prior to his entry upon his publick ministry, that the voice from heaven proclaimed his character. *This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased!* In short, whoever will be at the pains to compare the

different Evangelists narrations of John the Baptist's account of our Saviour, will, I am persuaded, see reason to believe, that it was not the intention, even at this early period, to conceal the important fact, that Jesus was the Messiah from the world !

If then, this appears to have been the case, so early as this, who will say that the giving intimations of the Messiahship of Jesus, at his birth, to prepare the minds of men for the reception of him, was either an improbable circumstance, or inconsistent with what we learn from the other parts of the Gospels ? True indeed it is, that Jesus himself adopted a different mode of conduct : but this alteration was, clearly, not the effect of choice, but, as I before observed, of necessity. The Jews were so disgusted at the meanness of his appearance ; and his professions were so different from their expectations, that he was obliged to use that caution with regard

regard to his true character, which we find him afterwards observing.

This appears to me, to be the true answer to Dr. Priestley's objection to the Messiahship of Jesus being made known at his birth. "But," says he, "had this
"been the case," i. e. of the character of Jesus being made known so remarkably as the history of the Miraculous Conception supposes—"the eyes of all the country
"must have been fixed on Jesus as the
"promised Messiah, and all attempts to
"conceal it, after his publick appearance,
"would have come too late."

We have just seen in what manner John the Baptist made known the character of Jesus; and it will, I suppose, be granted, that no man ever stood higher in the publick estimation, than he did; for the sacred historian observes, that all men held

John

John to be a Prophet indeed. Yet it does not appear that the Jews received his testimony to the greatness of his character ! We may therefore admit that the Messiah's character was publicly asserted, by the persons mentioned in the history of our Saviour's birth, and that even Anna spoke of him to all that looked for redemption in Israel ; and yet, it will not follow, that all after attempts to conceal the Messiahship of Jesus, would come too late. We well know, what kind of a redemption it was that they so eagerly expected, and that such a redemption had no countenance in the meanness of Jesus's condition. The testimony of Simeon and Anna, and of many other pious persons, therefore might, and in all probability was given, of his being the Messiah, and yet their testimony be disregarded by the Jewish nation, because they saw nothing in him that led to a confirmation of it !

Besides ;

Besides; what Gameliel told the Sanhedrim ought, in this case, to be taken into consideration. There were, he tells us, many pretenders to the Messiahship, (who, it is thought by learned men, appeared about the time of our Saviour's birth) that drew after them much people, who suffered many grievous calamities, in consequence of their adherence to them. This appears to account for the trouble, which the report of the wise Men gave to Herod, and to the people of Jerusalem. They were apprehensive of being involved in farther calamities, and therefore were become more cautious and guarded against farther imposition.

I cannot conclude my remarks, upon this part of Dr. Priestley's exceptions, without taking notice, that he himself has acknowledged, in express terms, that a Scheme may be devised that may reconcile
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the inconsistencies with which he has charged the history in question. As he has not told us what this scheme is, I have ventured to lay before the reader such observations, as have occurred to me, upon the subject. He will judge for himself how far they deserve to be attended to.

Another exception, which is urged by our Author against the Miraculous Conception, is that the Roman Census, described by St. Luke, could not regularly extend to that country, as Judea was not a province of the Roman Empire but had a King of its own, though in alliance with Rome, and in a state of dependence upon it. This objection Dr. Priestley has stated at large in the fifth volume of the Theological Repository, pages 91 to 99. But I shall not, at present, reply to it; as a more convenient opportunity of considering

dering it will occur, when we come to enquire into the external evidence for this Miracle.

The last, though by no means the least exception of our Author to the Miraculous conception, which I shall take notice of, under this head is, “ that it is
 “ not so much as mentioned, or, in the
 “ most distant manner alluded to, by
 “ Christ himself; or by any writer in the
 “ New Testament.” From hence, he concludes, that it does not appear to have gained any credit in that age; and that consequently, if there is no reason to think that it was generally believed at that time, we certainly should not believe it now.

This appears to be the substance of what Dr. Priestley has said, upon this part of the subject; and it, most certainly, deserves an attentive consideration. See Theol. Repos. v. iv. pp. 266 to 268.

Sensible

Sensible as I am, that the ground I am now upon, has been trodden but by few, if any, before me; the necessity of bespeaking the candour of my readers to what has occurred to me, by way of reply, to this formidable objection of our Author, will be apparent. Whether it is sufficient to remove the difficulty, is not for me to say. But, after the most careful attention that I have been able to give to this part of the subject, it appears to me, that there are no certain traces of this remarkable history, being made publick, during our Saviour's life. Nay, I think it must be admitted, that there is positive evidence in the Gospels, that Jesus was thought to be the legitimate Son of Joseph and Mary, not only by the Jews in general, but even by the people of Nazareth, where he lived, and was educated ! • And if this evidence

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• A Writer in the THEOLOGICAL REPOSITORY, whose signature is *Nazarenus*, mentions a circumstance which he thinks unfavourable to the doctrine
of

were wanting, the impropriety of making a Miracle of this nature, which was incapable of any other proof than the solemn declaration of Mary, publick, at an early

of the Miraculous Conception. “ In the seventh
 “ chapter of John, we are informed that the brethren
 “ of Jesus did not believe in him. Now, says he, if
 “ the birth of Christ had been supernatural, it is
 “ hardly credible that they should not have been in-
 “ formed of it; and one should think that they were,
 “ of all persons, most likely to give it credit. Evi-
 “ dence, which was, by no means sufficient to con-
 “ vince an indifferent person, or stranger, would not
 “ fail to satisfy, where a multitude of strong natural
 “ prejudices came to its aid. Now, there can be
 “ little doubt, but that a persuasion of the truth of
 “ the Miracle, and a knowledge of all those extra-
 “ ordinary circumstances, which are said to have
 “ attended the birth of Jesus, must have been quite
 “ sufficient to deliver them from all kind of suspicion
 “ concerning his divine appointment. But as we
 “ are particularly informed to the contrary, is there
 “ not the greatest reason to believe that they had
 “ never heard of this story; and consequently that
 “ the account which we have is not authentic?”—
 Theol. Repos. vol. v. p. 135—6.

If the reasoning of this Writer is of any force, it
 appears to me to operate, at least, equally against
 Jesus's

period, is evident at first sight ! Whatever good opinion might have been entertained of her personal character and chastity, antecedent to the acknowledging of Jesus as the Messiah, it was absolutely impossible to have given the least credit to her assertion. By a premature discovery she would not only have defeated the end of it ; but have, unnecessarily, exposed herself to the punishment of the civil magistrate.

But, notwithstanding the natural improbability of Mary's story ; unconnected

Jesus's being the Messiah, as against the Miraculous Conception ; for to *that*, the observation of the Evangelist, *that his brethren did not believe in him*, more particularly applies. With respect to the Miraculous Conception ; I allow that it does not appear to have been proper to reveal it, to any one, till he was received as the Messiah. His brethren afterwards, as it seems, did believe in Jesus, under that character, and they had sufficient opportunity to question Mary their mother concerning his birth !

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with the many extraordinary circumstances of the life and character of Christ—yet, when these came to be unfolded—when it appeared that he had all nature at his command, and acted in the name, and by the authority of his heavenly Father—the, who before might justly have been branded with infamy, as an impostor, would have deserved the greatest credit.—“ Her testimony, solemnly given,” as our Historian himself says, “ would hardly “ have been disputed.”

There is one case which, I apprehend, has some considerable resemblance to this; and the reasons for its concealment, at least for a considerable time, the same. The case which I allude to, is that of the transfiguration of our Lord, upon the Mount of Olives; where Peter, James, and John, as the history informs us, were the only persons present. When the vision

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was over, these disciples were strictly charged to tell it to no one, until after their master's resurrection. What now was the reason of this concealment? Was it not obviously this, that the witnesses of the vision were friends—persons suspected by the Jews of a combination with Jesus, to impose upon them? In this situation of things, that prudence and wisdom, which ever actuated our Saviour's conduct, marked his present behaviour. He commanded them to be silent upon the subject, until he had given the most substantial proofs of his being the Son of God, with power, by his resurrection from the dead, and that, of course, he would not impose an untruth upon them!

If this was necessary, in a case, where there were several witnesses of the fact—how much more proper and necessary, must it have been, when the credit of the

Mira-

Miraculous Birth of our Saviour, rested upon the single testimony of Mary? It was a caution that, to the Jews, seems to have been peculiarly necessary; for, so far were they from receiving any accounts of Miracles from the testimony of others, that those which they saw with their own eyes, hardly gained their assent.

In these circumstances, the silence observed concerning the Miraculous Conception, far from being extraordinary, was perfectly natural, and suitable to Jesus's usual conduct in communicating truth to the world. And there seems to be no more reason for rejecting the Evangelists narration of it, as fabulous, on this account, than for rejecting the history of the transfiguration! After our Saviour had wrought his numerous and truly astonishing miracles—after he had burst the bonds of the grave, and given such an

undeniable evidence of his divine mission—a less degree of evidence, it is to be presumed, would have been requisite to authenticate the Miraculous Conception, than if these strong, corroborating testimonies, had been wanting. In the former case, the bare declaration of Mary would have been, as already noticed, deserving of credit. In the latter, no man in his senses would have paid the least regard to it. A faith that would have removed mountains, would have been necessary to the reception of it.

If it be asked when this miracle was made publick, it must be owned, it is a question that I cannot answer. All that I can say is, that the fact is recorded in the Evangelists, and St. Luke has declared, in express terms, that what he wrote was derived, from a perfect knowledge of all things, from the very first.

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And he certainly would not have written any thing that had not gained credit, among the followers of Christ at the time that his Gospel was penned. The presumption therefore is (supposing St. Luke wrote this story) that it was believed, at that time !

To say, as our Author does,—“ that
 “ the authority of Luke is certainly less
 “ than that of an Apostle—that he possibly might have been misinformed, with
 “ respect to the early part of his history,
 “ and have taken up that splendid part of
 “ it too hastily,” is, to say the least, to use a new kind of language concerning this historian, who, as such, has generally been esteemed, not a whit behind the chief of the Evangelists. It is to render his testimony suspected, upon matters, which, even Dr. Priestley will acknowledge, to be of great importance. In a

word ; it is introducing a doubt, and uncertainty, which, as appears to me, may be of the most serious consequence ! If St. Luke was deceived in this instance—why might he not be deceived in others—Why not suppose that the Miracles of the Gospel are, in general, too splendid, and too extraordinary to be true ? If he might have been misinformed, and received his accounts from persons, interested to deceive ; and had not judgment to distinguish, the true from the false—the fable from the real fact—the conclusion will be too evident to be denied—that he was, wholly unqualified to be the historian of matters of so important a nature, as those which he has recorded.

Upon what grounds Dr. Priestley builds such conjectures as these, it is not easy to say, as he does not pretend to produce any other marks of haste or mistake in the
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rest of his history. His objection to St. Luke's history, because he was not an Apostle, seems to be sufficiently obviated, by the same story being told by one, who was actually invested with that character !

If it be said, that to have given the Miraculous Conception of Jesus, a proper degree of credit ; we ought to have been informed, of the time, and of the manner, in which it was made known ; and of the reception which it met with, from the Jews ; together with the objections that were, at the time, urged against it ; all of which circumstances are entirely concealed from our knowledge ; I can only answer, that other Miracles, which are recorded in the New Testament, do, in this respect, stand precisely upon the same footing.—The transfiguration, as we have seen from the declaration of our Saviour himself, was to be concealed, until after his resurrection

rection from the dead: but, the Evangelists are all silent, as to the time *when* it was made publick; or the manner in which it was received. The only intimation we have of it is, in a short recital of the fact, in the Epistle of Peter. And, it is remarkable, that our Lord's temptation has not, even this advantage; it not being mentioned, in any other way, than in a simple narration. Whether it was believed, or not, we are yet to learn, from any thing that we can gather, either from the Epistles, or Gospels!

The truth, as it appears to me, is, that it was, the principal design, of the Gospel historians, to prove the important fact, that Jesus was the Messiah. In doing this, the simplicity of their narrative, of the Miracles which he wrought, and of the conduct of the Jews towards him, in a vast variety of circumstances, is particularly

larly worthy of notice, and has been justly admired, by persons of discernment. It is, indeed, of itself, an argument, of more consequence than perhaps may, immediately, be perceived, of the truth of Christianity. They enter into no laboured defences of their Master's conduct. They relate the most astonishing Miracles, in the most artless, and unaffected manner; without annexing a single remark to them. And even those, which in their own nature, were incapable of any proof, are related, in the same stile, of beautiful simplicity! They are at no pains to induce a belief of them; or to vary, in the least, from the original manner, which they had adopted, in relating miracles, which were capable of the strongest and most convincing proofs!

If these remarks are just, they appear, to me, of very considerable consequence,

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in vindicating the narration, which the Evangelists give us, of the extraordinary and miraculous birth of our Saviour.— And, I know not of any other answer that can be given, to this mode of reasoning, than that it is vindicating one miracle, that is incapable of proof, by others, that are, precisely, in the same situation.

To this, I can only reply, that when these accounts are proved, not to be the genuine work of the Evangelists, I will readily acknowledge, that my reasoning is inconclusive, and give up, the history of the Miraculous Conception, and all other relations which are incapable of a particular and separate proof, as indefensible. This, Dr. Priestley has not, that I know of, attempted with respect to our Lord's transfiguration; or his temptation in the wilderness. And, I am apt to think, that if he conducts himself, by the rules of
evi-

evidence, and on the principles of sound criticism, his utmost efforts, upon this head, will be ineffectual. He has, however, at great length, endeavoured to show, from the early history of the Christian Church, that the external evidence for the truth of the history of the Miraculous Conception, is extremely defective—and, that it was not believed, by the generality, either of Jewish, or Gentile Converts, in the earliest ages; but was coined, on purpose to give a dignity to our Lord, to which, he had no right, or claim. Whether he has given satisfactory evidence of the early and general disbelief of this doctrine, remains now in the third and last place to be considered.

The very learned Author of the credibility of the Gospel history, has done, essential service, to the Christian cause, by tracing, through the several ages of the Church,

Church, from the first promulgation of the Gospels, down to our own times, the various facts, which we have now upon record, in those books: and, he has proved, by a series of evidence not to be controverted, not only that the writings, which now go by the names of the several Evangelists, were admitted as their genuine works, by those who lived, the nearest to their times, and who of course, were the most competent judges of their authenticity; but, that these writings are now, in the main, what they originally were when they came out of their hands.

This method of proving the truth of Christianity and the purity of its records, has been, deservedly, well received by all denominations of Christians; and indeed, must be highly gratifying to all who would build their faith, upon a solid foundation. And it is, in short, the allowed touch-

touchstone by which we, at this distance of time, are to judge of the truth or falsehood—of the genuineness, or forgery, of any of the narratives, or relations of facts, now recorded, in our present Gospels.*

Now, to apply this to the case before us. If many centuries had lapsed, without any notice having been taken of the Miraculous Conception—If the early writers, and Ecclesiastical historians, had been totally silent upon the subject—If, in short, no quotations were to be found in their works, manifestly drawn from the

* I have neither the convenience, nor the abilities for a minute examination of the early Christian Writers; but it seems to me to be highly worthy of the learned, to make an enquiry (upon the plan of Dr. Lardner) into their works, with a particular view to those relations in the Gospel history which are in their own nature incapable of proof. It seems peculiarly necessary to prove that these narrations were received in the earliest times as parts of their genuine and unadulterated Gospels.

history

history of that remarkable event; it would not *now* have deserved, the smallest regard, with whatever confidence its authenticity might, *afterwards*, have been asserted. But, nothing of this kind, is pretended. Nay; it is admitted, by our Author, that we do find it, in the received copies of Matthew and Luke; and that it is *almost* certain, it was there, in the time of Justin Martyr. He at the same time contends, that it is no less certain, there were, in early times, Gospels of Matthew, and of Luke too, which did not contain that story.

From this account, which we are not disposed to controvert; it appears that Justin Martyr, (who is supposed by the most judicious writers, to have been born, in the year of Christ 89, and to have suffered Martyrdom in 163,) was the first writer, whose works have come down to
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us, that has mentioned the Miraculous Conception; and that there were copies of these Gospels with, and without this fact. No inference, therefore, can fairly be drawn, either for, or against its authenticity, from this statement of the matter.

But, though no inference can arise, from hence, in favour of either side of the question; yet, a very important consequence, necessarily, flows from it. This difference of the copies of these Gospels must have led, to an immediate enquiry, which were the genuine ones, and which had, the marks of forgery upon them. Indifference, in the case, seems to have been absolutely impossible, whatever might have been the principles of the parties of those times. And, happily, for the cause of truth—this controversy began, under advantages for the discovery of a fraud;

(if

(if any fraud there was) of which no succeeding times could boast.

The question was agitated within a very few years of the times of the Apostles—when there were many copies of the Gospels dispersed abroad—when, in all probability, there were some Christians living, who had seen ; or, at least, were acquainted with those who had seen, the originals ; and, when one of the circumstances, recorded in St. Luke's account of the Miraculous Conception ; viz. the general enrolment, might have been, as clearly ascertained, as any one fact, asserted to have happened, in the present day.

With regard to the persons, by whom the enquiry was made—the advantages for the detection of a forgery ; if we may believe Dr. Priestley, were highly favourable—for he asserts, in express terms, that

that most of the Christians, in that age, were believers in the simple humanity of Christ; and that they were not without men of learning and abilities among them. They, therefore, had no prejudices, or prepossessions to impede the success of their inquiries; nor any temptation to suppress truth, from an apprehension, that it would not be grateful to the popular taste!

In this situation of things—with all the evidence arising from the controversy, and much more than we are possessed of—the candid Justin Martyr, as Dr. Priestley himself calls him, believed the fact was sufficiently authenticated, and the narrations of it, equally genuine, with the other parts of the writings of St. Matthew and St. Luke. This he asserted, in the most unequivocal terms; not to a few friends only—not in an obscure and lonely

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retreat—but, in a public apology for the Christian religion in the capital of the world.

His words are too remarkable to pass unnoticed! And, that no suspicion of unfairness in the quotation, may arise; I shall state them, as they stand in Dr. Lardner's *Credibility of the Gospel history*, under the article—Justin Martyr, vol. iii. book i. ch. x. p. 266,

“ At the same time an Angel was sent
 “ to the same Virgin, saying: *Behold, thou*
 “ *shalt conceive in thy womb by the Holy*
 “ *Ghost and thou shalt bring forth a Son*
 “ *and he shall be called the Son of the*
 “ *highest. And thou shalt call his name Jesus,*
 “ *for he shall save his people from their*
 “ *sins,—As they have taught who have*
 “ *writ the history of all things concern-*
 “ *ing our Saviour Jesus Christ. And*
 “ we

“ we believe them.” Mat. i. 20, 21.
 comp. Luke i. 31. Thus he writes, says
 Dr. Lardner in his first apology; which
 he elsewhere tells us was presented to the
 Emperor about the year 139.* Nor is
 this, the only testimony, of this early
 writer, to the authenticity of the history
 of the Miraculous Conception. He ap-
 peals, to the same story, in his contro-
 versial dialogue with Trypho, an unbe-
 lieving Jew. “ And the Virgin Mary,
 “ having been filled with faith and joy,
 “ when the Angel Gabriel brought her
 “ good tidings, that the spirit of the Lord
 “ should come upon her, and the power of
 “ the Higheft overshadow her, and there-
 “ fore that holy thing born of her should
 “ be the Son of God, answered: *Be it unto*
 “ *me according to thy word,* Luke i. 35, 38.”

* See Lardner's Cred. v. iii. p. 262.

These remarkable testimonies from Justin Martyr, repeated in different parts of his works, are not contradicted, but rather confirmed by Dr. Priestley; for he says—"It is true that we do find the story of the Miraculous Conception in the received Gospels of Matthew and Luke; and it is *almost* certain they were there in the time of Justin Martyr."* Why he should use the dubious expression, *almost certain* we are not informed; though it appears to have been a duty, which he owed to the public, to give his reasons for suspicion, if he had any, as his professed object is, to controvert the truth of the Evangelist's narration.

As Dr. Priestley has not produced any evidence against this testimony of Justin Martyr to the Miraculous Conception;

* Theol. Repos. vol. iv. p. 268.

such a public, and notorious appeal to an Heathen Emperor, of singular sagacity and penetration, and to the whole senate and people of Rome, attended with this solemn declaration—*We believe them*, must, so long as this appeal remains unimpeached, in the judgment of all impartial and discerning men, be considered as highly in favour of its authenticity.

If it be said that Justin Martyr, finding it recorded in some of the copies of the Gospels, might put an implicit faith in the truth of it, and receive it, on the same authority, with the other parts of the Gospels without examination—this is to suppose what appears to me in the highest degree improbable, viz. that no controversy had ever existed, either in, or before his time, concerning the genuineness of the different copies of the Gospel. For, if such a controversy had taken

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place,

place, Justin must not only have been unworthy of the character which has universally been given him, as a friend to truth, to have received it, without enquiry; but he must have been assailed with such evidence, (supposing the Miracle was a forgery, and that things were, as Dr. Priestley represents them) as no man could well have resisted, let him have been ever so much disposed to credulity.

The Christians were then, according to our author, mostly believers in the simple humanity of Christ; and but a few years before; this belief, it is said, was probably universal. We, at this distance of time, may dispute the certainty of this fact—but it could not be unknown to Justin. And, if it was so, the Unitarians could not have failed to object to him, the novelty of the doctrine, as a convincing proof of a forgery. But it would have

have been particularly to their purpose to have urged to him the objection of our author, " that as Judea was not at that time a
 " province of the Roman empire but had a
 " king of its own, though in alliance with
 " Rome, and in a state of dependence upon
 " it, the Roman Census could not regularly
 " extend to that country."* They had nothing to do but to say to Justin Martyr ; (and that they should not say it, is scarcely credible) look into the public registers—enquire into the customs of the Romans, in such cases—ask any intelligent man in Rome, what their practice is, and you will be satisfied that it has all the marks of forgery upon it, and that, of course, the whole story of the Miraculous Conception is a fable ! And yet in opposition to all this evidence ; Justin Martyr *publickly* and *solemnly* avows his belief of it—nay, he does more—he ap-

* Theol. Repos. vol. v. p. 91.

peals to these very registers. "It is
 "true," says Dr. Priestley, "that Justin
 "Martyr, and others of the Fathers, do
 "mention this Census under Herod the
 "Great, as what the Romans would find
 "an account of in their public registers.
 "But, says he, some of them likewise ap-
 "pealed to an account of Christ transmit-
 "ted by Pilate to the Emperor Tiberius.
 "The probability," he adds, "is, that
 "these writers, taking it for granted that
 "this account of the Census in the Gos-
 "pel of Luke was a true one, did not
 "scruple to appeal to it, as what they
 "did not doubt would be found to be
 "so. But we have no account of the
 "fact being verified, by an examination
 "of records." *

Whatever becomes of the appeal to the
 Roman Records, respecting Pilate's ac-

* Theol. Repos. vol. v. pp. 93, 94.

count of Christ, with which I have nothing to do in this question; * I beg leave to ask Dr. Priestley, whether he thinks it probable, on the supposition that neither Justin Martyr, nor any of the Fathers, examined the Roman Records, that

* One should have imagined, from the manner in which Dr. Priestley relates the account of the Acts of Pilate, said to have been transmitted to Tiberius, that it was generally believed, by good judges, that no such Acts were sent to him. But, if we look into Dr. Lardner's Testimonies of Ancient Heathens; it will appear that he has not only quoted Justin Martyr, and Tertullian, as appealing to those Acts, and Eusebius as confirming what they say; but he declares, that though the Acts of Pontius Pilate, and his letter to Tiberius, which we now have, are not genuine, but manifestly spurious; nevertheless, it must be allowed by all, that Pontius Pilate composed some Memoirs concerning our Saviour, and sent them to the Emperor; whether Justin Martyr, and Tertullian have given a just account of them or not. And, he is clearly of opinion, that it was customary for the Governors of Provinces to compose acts, or remarkable occurrences, and to send them to the Emperor; of which he gives several instances; and indeed the thing speaks for itself.

the

the Unitarians rested quiet, without making the examination for them? If they did, and found no such Register there, could they have failed of publicly declaring the non-existence of such a record? And, in that case, could Justin, as a man of candour, or indeed, of common honesty, have refused to make the examination? Or would he have dared, after this appeal of theirs, to have asserted, without enquiry, that it actually was there? If they did not make the examination, Dr. Priestley will do his cause some service by accounting for such a notorious instance of remissness when they had every temptation to undertake it! In short, it appears to me, that Dr. Priestley's reasoning, upon this head, in whatever light it is viewed, is so far from having any probability in it, that it is most evidently in direct opposition to his own representation of the state of

of things at that time; not to mention its inconsistency with the known character of Justin Martyr!*

It

* The following character of Justin Martyr is given by Dr. Jortin; a Divine, whose name will live, in the minds of judicious and impartial men, while there is any taste for liberality and a love of truth.

About A. D. 150, flourished Justin, the first Christian Author, after those who are called Apostolical, a virtuous, pious, honest man, and incapable of wilfully deceiving; but a hasty writer, and of a warm and credulous temper. He was highly and justly esteemed by the ancient Christians, and Eusebius makes honourable mention of him, as of one *ἐν τῷ καθ' ἡμᾶς διαπρέψας λόγῳ*, qui inter religionis nostræ sectatores maxime floruit, and he speaks of his two Apologies, his Dialogue with Trypho, and some other treatises, and produces some passages from that Dialogue, which shew that he had it as we have it now.

He wanted neither learning, nor vivacity, nor an unartificial eloquence. The love of truth was his predominant passion, to which he sacrificed all worldly considerations, and for which he laid down his

It is now time to lay before the reader,
a counter evidence against the Miraculous

Con-

his life with great resolution ; and therefore, who-
soever loves truth, should love him and his memory.

“ Galen, (says our amiable Writer John Hales)
“ *that great Physician, speaks thus of himself:—*I
“ know not how, even from my youth up, in a
“ wonderful manner, whether by divine inspiration,
“ or by fury and possession, or however you may
“ please to stile it, I have much contemned the opi-
“ nion of the many ; but Truth and Knowledge I
“ have above measure affected, verily persuading
“ myself that a fairer, a more divine fortune could
“ never befall a man. Some title, some little claim I may
“ justly lay to the words of this excellent person ; for the
“ pursuit of Truth has been my only care, ever since I
“ understood the meaning of the word. For this I
“ have forsaken all hopes, all friends, all desires,
“ which might bias me, and hinder me from driving
“ right at what I aimed. For this I have spent my
“ money, my means, my youth, my age, and all that I
“ have. If with all this cost and pains, my purchase
“ is but error, I may safely say, To err hath cost me
“ more than it has many to find the Truth ; and Truth
“ shall give me this testimony at last, that if I have
“ missed of her, it is not my fault, but my misfortune.”

Justin

Conception; which, in justice to Dr. Priestley, I shall state in his own words at length.

“The Ebionites,” (those who he asserts rejected this doctrine of the Miracu-

Justin could not, perhaps, have expressed himself upon this subject with the same strength and elegance; but he had the same heart, and the same turn of mind.†

Every one who reads this character of Justin Martyr, must consider him as a person of high respectability. But it appears that he had some of the weaknesses of human nature. He was, says Dr. Jortin, an hasty writer, and of a warm and credulous temper; a part of his character which I am not disposed to controvert. It is, indeed, unnecessary to my argument. If Dr. Jortin's description of him is just, that the love of truth was his predominant passion, to which he sacrificed all worldly considerations—the state of things in his time, according to Dr. Priestley's own account, was an effectual check upon his credulity. He must have had his attention turned to the objections of his adversaries; and, as a lover of Truth, that was all he wanted.

† Jortin's Remarks on Eccles. Hist. vol. ii. pp. 155--6.

lous conception) "were not," says he,
 "without men of learning and enquiry
 "among them; and of these Symmachus
 " (whose translation of the Old Testament
 "into Greek, is quoted with the highest
 "respect by Origin, Eusebius, and all
 "the antients) defended this particular
 "opinion of the Ebionites." Our au-
 thor goes on and says—"we have no
 "account of any of his arguments:
 "but that a man of his learning, and
 "respectable character, about the end
 "of the second century, with all the
 "evidence before him that we can have
 "in favour of it, and probably much
 "more than we now have against it,
 "should write in defence of his opinion,
 "is, of itself, *a fact* of considerable
 "consequence." Theol. Repos. vol. iv.
 p. 276.

That his opinion was overborne, not-
 withstanding his defence of it, and all
 that

that he could produce in its favour—that Justin Matyr, whom Tatian calls an admirable man, and Methodius says, was not far removed from the Apostles, in time, or virtue—that he should believe the Miraculous Conception, and declare it, in the face of the whole world, more than half a century before Symmachus's time, with all the evidence before him, and probably much more than we can have in favour of it—these are things, which with our author, seem to be of no consequence at all! Justin Martyr is scarcely worthy to be noticed with Symmachus: and even Symmachus's want of success, in propagating his opinion upon this subject, must be accounted for, from other causes, though it is not known, or even surmised, what arguments Symmachus made use of!

Were a person left to his own good sense and unbiaſſed judgment in this case,

I can-

I cannot but think that he would have concluded, that Symmachus's failure of producing conviction, with all the advantages of learning and abilities, and with all the evidence, in favour of his opinion, that we can pretend to have, was owing to the superiority of the evidence in favour of the Miraculous Conception. Symmachus's work, certainly existed long enough for the Christian world to judge of the force of his reasoning; for we have it, on the authority of Eusebius, who is quoted by Dr. Priestley, that the Commentaries of Symmachus, together with other interpretations of Scripture by the same author, were in the hands of Origen, who flourished in the third century. But neither Origen, nor the people of his time, there is reason to believe, rejected the Miracle. They did not, one should naturally suppose, think that the evidence against it was sufficient to justify Symmachus's opinion; and therefore they admitted

mitted it, as the genuine work of the Evangelists, in whose Gospels it is related. The inference of our author, however, is the very reverse of this. They, it seems, resisted the strongest arguments and the fullest proofs of a forgery; and they admitted the truth of the Miraculous Conception to be completely established, though opposed by all the learning and abilities of a Symmachus!

But candour obliges us to attend to our Author's method of accounting for the establishment of this doctrine, as he seems to think, against all evidence. " That
 " Symmachus's opinion was overborne,
 " notwithstanding his defence of it, will
 " not make an Unitarian think the worse
 " of it; as the Unitarian doctrine itself
 " was overborne; and it was probably
 " the operation of the same general causes
 " that was fatal to both the simple and
 F " proper

“ proper humanity; meaning by *proper*
 “ *humanity*, that Jesus had a human
 “ father, as well as a mother.”* Again
 he says† “ that the early Jewish Chris-
 “ tians, being the disciples of Christ, it
 “ may be supposed that they would have
 “ been pleased with a circumstance so
 “ much to his honour; the very principle
 “ adds he on which I doubt not, the
 “ belief of it did gain ground at length.”

When a person undertakes to account
 for a fact so remarkable as the reception
 of the doctrine of the Miraculous Con-
 ception, against all evidence, and against,
 what is represented to have been the
 general opinion, it appears to me, not
 only that the causes which he assigns for
 it, should be perfectly adequate to the
 effect produced; but the clearest evidence

* Theol. Repos. vol. iv. p. 276.

† Theol. Repos. vol. iv. p. 273.

should

should be given, that those causes, actually did produce such an effect. His reasoning, in this case, should not be founded on conjecture, but on undoubted and uncontrovertible facts.

But if we examine, with attention, Dr. Priestley's manner of expression, upon the subject; it will evidently appear that he has offered nothing that at all approaches to satisfactory evidence: conjecture *only* is substituted in its stead! In the first of the passages, which I have just quoted, he says; it was *probably* the operation of the same causes that was fatal to both the simple and proper humanity of Christ, that occasioned the opinion of Symmachus to be overborne. In the other; *he does not doubt* that the circumstances of such an extraordinary birth; being very much to the honor of Christ, was the very principle on which it did

gain ground at length. He asserts indeed,
 “ that very many of the Jewish Christians,
 “ who were generally called Ebionites,
 “ did not believe the Miraculous Con-
 “ ception ;” and he says, “ that it has
 “ the unanimous testimony of all who
 “ speak of them, even in the latest pe-
 “ riods ;” and from hence *he presumes*,
 “ that this disbelief was more general,
 “ and *probably* universal, in an earlier
 “ age.”* But I have shewn, as appears
 to me, on no slender grounds, that had
 this been the true state of things at this
 early period—the Miraculous Conception
 (supposing it to have been a forgery)
 could have stood no chance of a recep-
 tion from any honest minded man ; much
 less of a general and universal one.

But, notwithstanding the powerful in-
 fluence of these causes, that our Author

* Theol. Repos. vol. iv. p. 273.

says were so fatal to the humanity of Christ; it may, I think, be made appear from his own concession, that the Miraculous Conception had in itself no particular tendency among those whom he supposes were believers of it, to aggrandize the character of Christ; for when our Author is endeavouring to conciliate the minds of his readers, to his undertaking, he tells them—"there is no more reason
 "why the Arian, or the Athanasian,
 "should be more attached to the belief
 "of the Miraculous Conception than the
 "Socinian. The doctrine itself connects
 "equally well, or equally ill, with any
 "particular hypothesis concerning the
 "nature of Christ." Again he says—"It
 "may be imagined to be more *honourable*
 "to Christ to have come into the world
 "without the help of a man, than with
 "it; but this is an affair of *imagination*
 "only."* Such are his observations in

* Theol. Repos. vol. iv. p. 246.

the outset of his work. But when he comes to account for the general reception of the Miraculous Conception. Then he tells his readers, that it was probably the operation of the same general causes, that was fatal to both the simple and proper humanity of Christ; forgetting, as it should seem, his own assertion, that the doctrine itself connected equally well, or equally ill, with any particular hypothesis concerning the nature of Christ.*

* Dr. Priestley has employed several pages to prove, that the Gnostics rejected the doctrine of the Miraculous Conception; and he thinks this “ is a
 “ fact more extraordinary, and more unfavourable
 “ to the credibility of it, than the disbelief of it by
 “ any of the Catholic Christians, Jews, or Gentiles;
 “ because this doctrine would have suited remark-
 “ ably well with their other principles.”

How to reconcile this language with the assertion of our author, that the doctrine itself connected equally well, or equally ill, with any particular hypothesis concerning the nature of Christ—I am utterly at a loss to say!

But

But not to avail ourselves of this oversight—let us suppose that the Miraculous Conception was credited through a desire to aggrandize the character of Christ: what shall we say of the Ancient Unitarians; for they, we are told by Dr. Priestley, entertained opposite opinions upon the subject; though they certainly were under no temptation to receive the story, with a view to aggrandize the character of Christ. They were, from the very nature of their principles, free from all prejudices, in its favour; and were at full liberty to examine, with candour, the evidences of its reality, and to judge impartially of the merits of the case.

A writer in the Theological Repository, whose signature is *Nepiodidasalos*, is so hard pressed, with this opposition of opinions upon the subject of the Miraculous Conception, as candidly to acknowledge,

“ that upon a just and impartial estimate
 “ of the matter, we must conclude, that
 “ the acceptance of this doctrine, by one
 “ part, speaks more strongly in favour of
 “ it, than its rejection by the other part of
 “ this sect, pleads in opposition to it.
 “ Whatever reasons (and such there are)
 “ may be supposed to have influenced the
 “ opinions of one party, it is hardly credi-
 “ ble, that any thing less than *satisfactory*
 “ *evidence* could have operated to the de-
 “ termination of the other.” See Theol.
 Repos. vol. 5, p. 526.

I have now laid before the reader, such
 Observations as have occurred to me, in
 answer to the exceptions of Dr. Priestley,
 drawn from the natural improbability of
 the Miraculous Conception—from the
 Gospel history; and from the records of
 antiquity. I have shewn that the character
 of Jesus was truly *a unique*, perfectly
 singu-

singular, and unexampled, in the creation ; that it appears evident ; not from a few particular passages, whose meaning may, by different persons, be differently interpreted ; but from the whole tenour of the New Testament, that it was plainly the intention of the sacred writers, to aggrandize the character of Christ ; and that therefore the Miraculous Birth of Jesus, is in perfect harmony with this design.

Upon the head of the internal evidence of this Miracle, I have shewn, that if some of the Evangelical historians omit to take any notice of it, while they take notice of other events, of far less consequence ; they likewise omit *others*, whose importance is unquestionable ; and I have shewn that it is, perfectly agreeable to their usual manner in communicating truths, which were in their own nature incapable of proof ; simply to give a narration of facts, without a single observation
annexed

annexed to them. With regard to the objections drawn from the early revelation of Jesus's character as the Messiah; it has been shewn that it was not the original plan of providence that his character should be concealed; but the effect of necessity; arising from the opposition which our Saviour met with, from the Jews.

I have likewise shewn that if there are no certain traces that the Miraculous Conception was made known in the early part of our Lord's ministry, that the same reasons for concealment, operated in the case of the transfiguration, and very probably in that of the temptation; of the belief of which, we have no more evidence, from the Gospel history, than we have for that of the Miraculous Conception.

Upon

Upon the head of the external evidence for the Miraculous Conception—it has been seen that it was mentioned very early by Justin Martyr, and asserted to have been believed, in common, with the other parts of the Gospel history: and we have observed, that though there were in early times different copies of the Gospels; some with, and some without the history of the Miraculous Conception; * from which

* I have omitted to take notice, in its proper place, of an observation of Dr. Priestley; which, however, may not very improperly be inserted here. He thinks, it is by no means improbable, that an interpolation of the chapters in question, might have taken place; as, he says, “no person can well
 “doubt of something of the same nature having
 “taken place, with respect to several passages in
 “the books of Scripture, even where we have no
 “evidence whatever, from history, from manuscripts,
 “or from antient versions, of the passages having
 “ever been, what we now take it for granted,
 “they originally were. This he thinks to have
 “been the case with respect to the word *μαρτυρα*,
 “John vi. 4.” And, he says, “that the famous
 “verse, 1 John v. 7. concerning the three that bear
 “record

which no inference on either side of the question could fairly be drawn ; yet that this difference of the copies of the Gospels must have led to an immediate enquiry, which were the genuine ones, and which had the marks of forgery upon them ; and that such was the state of men and things, at that time, according to our author's account, as was highly favourable to the discovery of a fraud ; and particularly

*“ record in heaven, has been sufficiently proved to
 “ have come into the epistle in this unauthorized
 “ manner.”*

Whoever has read Mr. Travis's learned and laborious defence of this last passage, will hardly agree with our Author, that it is *sufficiently proved* to be an interpolation.

But, whatever is the fact with respect to these passages ; it must be evident to every one, that the interpolation of a single word ; or even of a sentence, was much more easy, and much more likely to be overlooked, than the interpolation of whole chapters, which contained the most singular and extraordinary transactions. If these chapters were not in the original copies, it must have been a bold and
 hardy

cularly with respect to the Roman Census, of the truth or falshood of which, every man in Rome might be able to form an accurate judgment.

To the objection of Dr. Priestley, that the Miraculous Conception gained credit, from a desire to aggrandize the character of Christ; it has been replied, that he has adduced no proofs of his assertion; but indulged himself in conjecture and surmise *only*, and that he has, himself, acknowledged that the doctrine itself, connected equally well, or equally ill, with any particular hypothesis concerning the nature of Christ.

In fine; though the evidences for this primary Miracle of the Gospel, are hardly undertaking indeed, to have palmed them afterwards upon the world; and impossible that they should not be noticed, the moment they appeared!

If the reader turns back to pages 30, 31, and 32, of this tract, and connects this note, with what is there said, he will be able to judge, more accurately, of the propriety of it.

neither

neither so strong, nor so numerous, as for many of the other Miracles which are recorded in the New Testament; as, in truth, from the very nature of the Miracle, they could not be; yet it does not appear that they are, in any view, so defective as our author seems to imagine; or such as will justify a rejection of it. But of this the reader will, I presume, form a tolerably accurate judgment, after having read what I have advanced upon the subject.

I shall now conclude the whole, with an Observation, or two, upon the manner in which I apprehend enquiries of this nature, should be conducted; and which it appears to me, Dr. Priestley will do well, particularly, to attend to.

The chapters of St. Matthew and St. Luke which have been the subject of the
pre-

preceding Observations, give an account of the Miraculous Conception of our Saviour. A suspicion arises about their authenticity—or, whether they are a part of the genuine writings of these Evangelists. This therefore becomes a fit subject of cool and dispassionate disquisition. In discussing this question; let us be guided by the rules of sound criticism—let every evidence, for, and against the authenticity of the Miracle be produced that antient history affords.—let the internal characters, of truth, or falsehood, be examined, with all the freedom which the importance of the case requires; and let us, by all means, be influenced by the superior weight of evidence, on which ever side it turns! Let this be done with respect to every passage and every fact which is recorded in the Christian records; of which we may entertain a suspicion. All wise and good men, will not only
 applaud,

applaud, but encourage the undertaking. But here let us stop. Let it not be supposed that God would choose, credulous, unfaithful, or weak men, to transmit to us the memorials of his abundant kindness towards the sons of men. Let us not think ourselves at liberty to receive, or reject, whatever suits our particular system. If we do this, Christianity is the most uncertain thing in the world! If for instance St. Luke can be supposed to have taken up his account of the Miraculous Conception; that splendid part of his narrative, as Dr. Priestley calls it, too hastily—from persons interested to deceive; and without the fullest evidence which the nature of the case would admit—what security have we, for the rest of the facts which he relates? Why may we not be deceived in one as well as another? Where shall we stop, and by what means distinguish the fictions from the realities, which

which he has recorded? If St. Paul could either wilfully, or ignorantly use false arguments; he must have been a very unfit person to communicate to the world, the true nature of Christianity; and he must have lied, when he solemnly asserted, that he had the whole doctrine of the Gospel, by immediate revelation from heaven, without any communication from men; for we cannot, for a moment, suppose that false reasoning was necessary to the support of Christianity; which, so far as I am able to understand it, is really, what St. Paul declared it to be—the power of God, and the wisdom of God!

It must therefore, as appears to me, be admitted as a fundamental position, never to be departed from, that the Apostles and Evangelists were, every way qualified to be faithful historians of the transactions and extraordinary events which happened

in the life of our blessed Lord; and that the only enquiry which we, as Christians, can be concerned in, is whether any parts of the histories, which now go by their name, are really of their composition; or were introduced afterwards, by knavery and imposture.

If we do not proceed upon this principle; we may indeed know what Socinianism; or what any other human system is—but we cannot know what genuine and unadulterated Christianity is. Dr. Priestley may indeed believe (though he rejects the doctrine of the Miraculous Conception) that the other Miracles of the Gospel, are true; but others, less credulous than he, may object to every thing of a miraculous nature, as contrary to the uniform experience of what passes in the world. They may think the miraculous relations of the Gospel, invented by persons,

sons, interested to deceive; and that the Narrators, dazzled by their splendor, might be induced to record them, on their information;—or they may think them nothing more than a compliance of the historian, with the custom prevalent among ancient nations, of making mankind believe a peculiar interposition of the Gods, when new Empires, and new Religions, were to be established.

But we, I trust, have far better reasons for our belief, and a foundation for our faith, that will stand against all the attacks of Infidelity. The proofs of the truth of the Miracles of the Gospel, are so numerous and well attested, and they were wrought in such situations and circumstances, that no common fact can well be better ascertained—no testimony can be more worthy of credit.



A P P E N D I X.

WHEN I first determined to lay the preceding observations before the publick, it was my intention to have confined my thoughts to what Dr. Priestley had advanced upon the subject; supposing that he had candidly, and with the utmost impartiality, offered every thing that was material upon the subject. At least, I did not imagine, when he asserts that Justin Martyr is the first writer that mentions the Miraculous Conception, that there were any others, who with any pretensions to a prior date, had taken notice of this miracle.

It

It appears, however, upon farther enquiry, that there is an epistle extant, ascribed to Ignatius, a cotemporary of the Apostles, which particularly mentions this history of the Miraculous Conception, and almost in the very words of the Evangelist.

But as the authenticity of this Epistle has been the subject of much dispute among learned men, it is but candid to suppose, from Dr. Priestley's silence upon this head, that he is among those who look upon it as spurious. But, however this be, I cannot think it would have done him any discredit, to have produced this testimony of Ignatius, in behalf of the Miraculous Conception, and to have stated his reasons for thinking that it was not genuine; especially as the justly celebrated Le Clerc—our Arch-Bishop Wake—and Dr. Lardner, stand among the many who have defended its authority.

The first of these writers is the editor of a very elegant edition of Ignatius's Epistles, in a work entitled *Patres Apostolici*, and the Arch-Bishop has the reputation of having given a very accurate and faithful translation of these Epistles; to which is annexed a Dissertation upon their Antiquity. The latter, however, it must be acknowledged, is not so fully satisfied of this, as to exclude all doubt,

But, that the reader may form some judgment of his opinion, and the reasons upon which it is founded, I shall faithfully transcribe what he has said upon the subject; only premising that he had the advantage of following the two great men already mentioned.

After having asserted that the larger epistles ascribed to Ignatius, in the general opinion of learned men, are interpolated, he adds—"But whether the smaller
" them-

“ themselves, are the genuine writings of
 “ Ignatius, Bishop of Antioch, is a ques-
 “ tion that has been much disputed, and
 “ has employed the pens of the ablest
 “ critics. And whatever positiveness
 “ some may have shewn on either side,
 “ I must own I have found it a very
 “ difficult question. I shall, however,
 “ deliver my opinion, formed upon the
 “ enquiry I have made into this contro-
 “ versy. And every one will be able to
 “ judge of it by the testimonies here
 “ alledged.

“ I make little doubt, but the smaller
 “ epistles, which we now have, are, for
 “ the main, the same epistles of Ignatius,
 “ which were read by Eusebius, and
 “ which it seems pretty plain from Ori-
 “ gen, were extant in his time. As for
 “ the quotation from Irenæus, 'tis dis-
 “ putable whether he there cites a passage

" of a *writing*, or only mentions some
 " words or expressions of Ignatius, which
 " might be spoken by him upon the near
 " view of his martyrdom. But though
 " this may bear some dispute, the testi-
 " mony of Irenæus is not altogether with-
 " out its weight in favour of the epistles.

" Considering then these testimonies
 " I have alledged from Irenæus, Origen,
 " and Eusebius, and also the internal
 " characters of great simplicity and piety
 " which are in these epistles (I mean the
 " smaller) it appears to me probable,
 " that they are, for the main, the genuine
 " epistles of Ignatius.

" If there be only some few sentiments
 " and expressions, which seem inconsistent
 " with the true age of Ignatius; 'tis
 " more reasonable to suppose them to be
 " additions, than to reject the epistles
 " them-

" themselves entirely; especially in this
 " scarcity of copies which we now labour
 " under. As the interpolations of the
 " larger epistles are plainly the work of
 " some Arian, so even the smaller epistles
 " may have been tampered with by the
 " Arians, or the Orthodox, or both:
 " though I don't affirm, there are in
 " them any considerable corruptions or
 " alterations." See Lardner's Credibi-
 lity, vol. 3. book 1. chap. 5. Article
 Ignatius.

Having thus stated the opinion of this
 learned, and as it appears to me, impartial
 writer, upon the authenticity of Ignatius's
 Epistles, I shall now set down this ancient
 Father's testimonies to the truth of the
 Miraculous Conception, and in doing
 this, I shall give as accurate a translation
 of the passage as I am able from Le
 Clerc's Edition of the *Patres Apostolici*.

" The

" The cross of Christ is to unbelievers
 " a stumbling block ; but to the faithful,
 " salvation and eternal life. Where is
 " the wise man ? Where is the disputer ?
 " Where is the boasting of those who are
 " called mighty ? For the Son of God,
 " who was begotten before the worlds,
 " and was appointed over all things in
 " the counsel of the Father, was con-
 " ceived, according to the dispensation
 " of God, in the womb of Mary, of the
 " seed of David, by the Holy Ghost.
 " For behold, saith he, a Virgin shall
 " conceive in her womb, and she shall
 " bear a Son, and he shall be called
 " Emmanuel."*

I shall make no comments upon this
 testimony of Ignatius, but only observe,

* See Ignatius's Epistle to the Ephesians, in Le
 Clerc's Patres Apostolici.

that

that if it is his genuine composition, written about the year 116, it will be a considerable evidence in favour of the authenticity of those chapters in our Gospels, which contain this part of our Lord's History.

THE Rev. Dr. Thomas F. ...
 the University of Cambridge, ...
 ing lately published two German ...
 ed before that learned body, in the last ...
 of which he endeavoured to ...
 testimony of Christ and his Apostles upon ...
 a subject that has engaged much of my ...
 attention; and on which I had year pre- ...
 sented my thoughts to the public in a ...
 work entitled An Illustration of ...
 of Scripture; I feel myself ...
 certainly obliged to take notice of ...
 objections as he thinks that though my ...
 ADV- ...
 over the more common hypotheses, yet ...
 that

ADVERTISEMENT.

THE Rev. Dr. Thomas Edwards, of the University of Cambridge, having lately published two Sermons, preached before that learned body, in the latter of which he endeavours to invalidate the testimony of Christ and his Apostles, upon a subject that has engaged much of my attention; and on which, I last year presented my thoughts to the publick, in a work entitled *An Illustration of various Passages of Scripture*; I feel myself particularly obliged to take notice of these objections, as he thinks, that though my interpretation possesses some advantages over the more common hypothesis, yet that

that there are some things which seem strongly to oppose, if not irrefragably to confute the opinion which I espouse.

As a friend to Christianity, I shall rejoice in an opportunity, (if the little tract which I now lay before the publick meets with their approbation) of canvassing this subject more thoroughly; being fully convinced, that it is of the first importance, both towards vindicating the character of Christ and his Apostles, and understanding the Epistles of the New Testament.

Dr. Edward's may, with Mr. Gibbon, assert that the predictions of Christ and his Apostles *will furnish examples of considerable error*.* The Orthodox Father of the celebrated Prelate, who translated Isaiah, may assent to the validity of Mr.

* See Dr. Edwards's 2d Sermon, p. 11.

Gibbon's objection, by confessing, without reserve, *that the Apostles were mistaken.** Grotius may insinuate, that for wise purposes, *the pious deception was permitted to take place.*† And the ingenious Professor of the University of Cambridge, may not appear extremely solicitous to relieve the Apostles *from the accusation of error.*‡ But though I am persuaded (to use the language of Dr. Edwards) *that our religion is founded on a rock, which the boldest assaults of infidelity can never undermine, and that a judicious defender of the faith will skilfully discriminate the outworks which he ought to abandon, from the posts of strength which he ought to maintain;*§ yet I am bold to affirm, that if the predictions of Christ and his Apostles are to be reckoned among the *outworks* which

* See Dr. Edwards's 2d Sermon, p. 12.

† Ibid, p. 13. ‡ Ibid, p. 13. § Ibid, p. 10.

we ought to abandon, I am unable to discriminate *the posts of strength*, which we ought to maintain. If Dr. Edwards's reasoning upon the subject is just, the Christian Citadel must fall, and, like the baseless fabrick of a vision, leave not a wreck behind.

To speak without a metaphor—Upon the accomplishment of the predictions of our Saviour and his Apostles, alluded to, by Dr. Edwards, I do not hesitate to stake the credit of Christianity. In doing this, I may be thought, by some, to express myself in too strong and unguarded a manner—but I cannot, upon the most mature reflection, retract the sentiment.

Christ himself has staked his own credit on the fulfilment of these very predictions, by an asseveration as solemn and as forcible as language will admit of. *Verily, I say*
unto

unto you—this generation shall not pass, till all these things be fulfilled. Heaven and earth shall pass away; but my words shall not pass away. How a man can be a Christian, and not believe that these predictions were actually fulfilled, in that generation in which our Saviour lived, is to me astonishing! The epithets of *Error* and *Mistake*, would have been too soft, for the occasion, and the term *Impostor* would have been more justly substituted in their stead.

That the objections of Dr. Edwards and his friend Mr. Gibbon upon this head are totally unfounded, and arise from a very partial consideration of the subject, and not seldom, from a most palpable misunderstanding of the plainest passages of Scripture—that Theologians in general have not done that justice to the cause of Christianity, in this instance, of which

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it is fully and justly capable, I hope to be able, *without the help of unnatural criticisms—without sophisticating Scripture by specious glosses—or perplexing them by visionary conjectures,** to prove to the satisfaction of every candid and dispassionate enquirer.

Dr. Edwards expresses his utter astonishment, that in my *Illustration of various passages of Scripture*, I have taken no notice at all of the 25th chapter of St. Matthew; the beginning of which, he very justly observes, is closely united with the former by the particle THEN, and the 14th verse firmly connected with the beginning by the particle FOR. The truth is, Dr. Edwards rashly condemns what he does not understand. I, after the manner of some great Commentators, pass it

* See Dr. Edwards's Sermon, p. 11.

silently over, and for the same reason. But, notwithstanding he challenges the most subtle and inventive genius to accommodate the remaining portion to any other event than the great day of retribution, I will (*οὐκ ἔγω*) undertake to prove, (though I really did not perceive it, till this Advertisement was nearly finished) that the whole of that chapter is a beautiful and elegant continuation of the former; and I hope it will then appear, with respect to these Chapters at least, that obscurity is not justly to be imputed to the Author of them; and still less, that they abound with every imperfection of style which can possibly deform a language! I must beg leave to add, that I am so confident that I have gained an accurate meaning of the knowledge of this chapter, that I am willing to stake the little reputation I am possessed of, upon the issue.

I only

I only ask, from those who are in situations to procure them, for access to such books as my humble situation in life, and the calls of a young family, will not permit me to acquire, and the encouragement of a generous publick, in a cause of such importance to the interests of Religion !

ASH, near SANDWICH,
KENT.

As the size of the work cannot at present be ascertained, the names of those who are inclined to encourage this undertaking, are requested to be left at the booksellers mentioned in the title page. The price will be regulated according to the size.

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